

UNLESS WE PLAN NOW

is Britain a
democracy

by Frank Hardie

'Defeat of Hitlerism is necessary so that there may be freedom ; but this war, like the last war, will produce nothing but destruction unless we prepare for the future now, unless we plan now for the better world we mean to build.' FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

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PREFACE

The object of this series of pamphlets is to encourage, and to aid, organised discussion of the social, economic and political problems, which have arisen or are arising out of the war. That is to say, they are intended for use by the discussion circles, debating societies and the like which are springing up in bodies such as H.M. Forces, Civil Defence Workers, Youth Groups, Church Groups, and Women's Societies. They are simply written, but the issues with which they deal have not, we hope, been unduly simplified. One of our pamphlets deals with the setting up and efficient running of such groups.

We believe that we have succeeded in finding writers who are thoroughly qualified to expound their subjects. Each of them has been asked to remember that his function is not to provide propaganda for any particular plan or doctrine, but to place before his readers the principal facts and points of view that must be taken into account if any agreed solution is to be found. Our authors have also been asked to base their approach upon the good of the community as a whole, rather than on the interests of any section, however sympathetic to them.

In order that these standards should be maintained the draft of every pamphlet has been scrutinised by an editorial committee. But the opinions expressed in them remain those of the writers, and must not be taken to commit the Association as a whole.

Finally, with world opinion divided as it is to-day, some idealistic bias is unavoidable. We advocate democracy, and further we stand for what, generally speaking, our enemies in this war attack under the name of humanitarianism. By this we mean that men and women cannot be regarded merely as cogs in a machine of government, or as the instruments of a leader's will; on the contrary, they are possessed of fundamental rights both as individuals exercising freedom of judgment, and as citizens entitled to play an active part in the conduct of affairs.

And it follows from this—or so it seems to us—that a corresponding duty devolves upon the community as a whole. That duty is to secure for its members the fullest development of which they are capable in both these capacities, and at the same time to train them in respect for the equal rights and freedom of others. It is becoming daily clearer that this must entail changes in many social arrangements and assumptions, and we hope that this series of pamphlets will play some small part in ensuring that these changes are faced not with hostility and reluctance, but in an atmosphere of co-operation and good-will.

Is Britain a Democracy?

To M.P.O.

PART I

I. What Does Democracy Mean ?

Human beings have to be governed, that is to say, there must be some way of deciding the various questions which affect any large number of them in common. In western Europe our ideas about the problem of what is the best form of government, like so many of our ideas on important questions, can be traced back to ideas which were first thought out by the ancient Greeks. That is why the words which describe various forms of government almost all end with the syllable "cracy," which is derived from the ancient Greek word "kratos," meaning power or rule. Thus there is, for example, plutocracy—government by the rich; bureaucracy—government by officials; theocracy—government by priests; aristocracy—government by the best (but then who is to decide who are the best?); and finally democracy—government by the people.

Now, obviously it is not necessary to argue here at any length that democracy is the best form of government. We are assuming that this is so and only trying to find out whether England is, in fact, governed in this way. But it is worth saying, quite briefly, that the fundamental reason for believing that democracy is the best form of government is perfectly simple, namely, that since the object of all government is to benefit the people who are governed, the easiest way of making sure that they are in fact benefited is to let them do the governing themselves—obviously they know better than anyone else what benefits they want. This proposition can be expressed in a single sentence taken from ancient Roman law, namely: "That which touches all should be approved by all," or, in the homely English image, that "Only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches." Or again we can adapt Abraham Lincoln's classic definition of democracy as "government of the people, for the people, by the people," and say that while obviously you must have "government *of* the people," you cannot ensure "government *for* the people" except by means of "government *by* the people."

2. How Can Democracy Work in Modern States ?

The chief problem that arises about this idea of democracy,

or government by the people, is not, therefore, a theoretical problem as to how the idea is to be justified, but a practical one as to how it is to be carried into effect, and this problem arises mainly on account of the large size of the peoples who have to be governed. It is comparatively easy to get a real democracy going in any small group of people, for in a small group of people who know each other well, and like each other, and are roughly agreed as to the sort of aims they have in common, it is comparatively easy to decide in a genuinely democratic way any questions which affect the whole group. We have all seen this actually happening. In some committee or club, for example, some question comes up for decision. Everybody expresses on equal terms their opinion as to what should be done. These opinions may at first differ completely from one another, but eventually, when the whole subject has been thoroughly thrashed out, a mysterious something emerges which we call "the sense of the meeting." There is no need to argue any further, let alone take a vote. Everybody has agreed as to what should be done, and nobody feels that the proposed plan, whatever it may be, is contrary to his own ideas. Ideally democracy would work like that in a whole nation, but unfortunately we are very far from that ideal. How can there be "a sense of the meeting" of that kind in a group of the size of the thirty million or so adult inhabitants of Great Britain?

3. What Does Representative Government Mean ?

It is for this reason that we have invented the system of representative, or parliamentary, government. The system of direct democracy, i.e., that under which every member of the community is directly consulted as to the decision in all political questions, can only work in very small communities. It was used in some of the small city-states of ancient Greece; it is still used to-day in four Cantons in Switzerland, in town meetings in New England in the United States, and in parish meetings in this country.

4. The History of Political Democracy in Britain.

In Great Britain as a whole, however, we carry on democracy by the whole thirty million or so of the adult population electing 615 persons to represent them as Members of Parliament. That is something we now take for granted. We should, however, remember that until comparatively recently—indeed, broadly throughout the last one hundred and fifty years—the question of whether *every* adult was to be entitled to a parliamentary vote was a burningly controversial issue. Moreover, throughout this period it was on this question, and this question alone, that every argument on the subject

we are now discussing, whether Britain is a democracy, always turned. It was argued, and surely quite rightly argued, that democracy under a representative system must mean that all citizens without exception should have the right to a parliamentary vote, for otherwise some of the people would not be having any say as to how they should be governed, and government by the people, therefore, would not be a reality. This system of universal suffrage, which a hundred years ago seemed a remote ideal, has now been achieved. There is no need to go into the details of how this has been done. Broadly speaking, up to the year 1832 the right of electing Members of Parliament was the privilege of a small and closed circle. The great Reform Act of 1832 gave the vote to the upper middle classes. The Act of 1867 gave it to the middle classes generally and to the workers in the towns, the Act of 1885 gave it to agricultural labourers, and finally the Acts of 1918 and 1928 enfranchised women, so that now practically every adult citizen of this country has the vote.

5. Have the Results of Universal Suffrage Been Disappointing ?

Very naturally the principle of "one man, one vote," now that it has been carried into practice, no longer seems exciting to us in the way that it did to our forefathers. Very naturally also we can see clearly, now that universal suffrage has been achieved, that the final goal of perfect democracy is still a long way ahead of us. Consequently some people even go so far as to say that the results of universal suffrage have been very disappointing. But when we look at all the reforms which have been achieved as the result of the common people having the vote, and therefore the power to get their way in politics, is it really true to say that the results of their having that power have been disappointing? Even if democracy is still far from perfect, is that any reason for not being grateful for the amount of democracy that has already been achieved? It is a very difficult business at one and the same time to criticise our democracy for its imperfections and to be properly appreciative of the good parts of it. Walter Bagehot, the author of the best book on the English Constitution, once said that there was a danger that the English would eventually fail through not understanding how great were the institutions which they had created.

6. How Does Political Democracy Work in Britain ?

This system of representative government based on universal suffrage is worked in Great Britain by the whole country being divided into 615 districts, which for this particular purpose we call "constituencies," the inhabitants of each one

of which have the right to elect a Member to represent them in Parliament. Except in exceptional circumstances (such as at present during the war) no Parliament may sit for more than five years, and normally therefore once every five years, though sometimes more often, there is a "General Election." This means that all the existing M.P.s have in effect to resign and elections of new Members or re-elections of the former Members take place simultaneously in every one of these 615 constituencies. Usually in each constituency there are two or three parliamentary candidates representing the two or three big political parties, and what happens, therefore, at a General Election is that all the voters of this country together choose which *party* is to govern them for the next five years.

Now this is an extremely important question for the voter to decide, and he ought to make his choice very carefully. Very often you hear someone grumbling about something the Government is doing, and when you ask you find out that this particular person at the last Election did actually vote for the political party which is now in power. The answer to his grumble is therefore a perfectly simple one: "You have only yourself to blame for what you think are the wrong policies now being carried out, because it was you who decided that these politicians should now be in power." It is wrong to think that your one vote is something small and unimportant because it is only one vote; it is a case of the little drops of water that make the mighty ocean. Your one vote, though, as we shall see, it is not the only way in which you can influence the policy of the Government, is the most important way in which you can influence it, and you ought, therefore, to think long and hard before deciding in whose favour you are going to cast it.

Another point to notice about General Elections is this—you do not, when you vote, directly vote for or against some particular policy or principle. You vote for some particular political party, though you do, of course, know what policies and principles that party stands for. What you really decide in fact at a General Election is which of two particular sets of men is to govern the country for the next five years, and if you try to think it out, can you think of any better practical way (which is, as we said at the start, the problem we are up against) by which a community of thirty million persons can govern itself?

One argument in favour of this particular way of solving this problem is this. The political questions which have to be decided under modern conditions are often extremely complicated and hard to understand. How many of us, for

example, could give a clear account of what the Gold Standard is? How many of us, therefore, are fitted to decide whether or not this country should be on the Gold Standard? But surely all of us, whatever our degree of education or intelligence, are capable of forming sound judgments about human character. We have all of us met and known a lot of people and we can decide pretty easily which of them we like and which of them we dislike. We are all fitted, therefore, to decide which of two sets of men we want to govern us for the next five years.

This decision has been made all the easier for us because of broadcasting. The parliamentary candidates hold meetings in their constituencies and make speeches saying what they intend to do if they are elected, but comparatively few people go to these meetings. Comparatively few people, therefore, when they mark their ballot paper with a cross and cast their vote for either Smith or Brown, have the haziest notion of what Smith or Brown even look like, but practically all of us now, when there is a General Election, listen to one or two of the speeches made on the wireless by the national leaders on either side. Any voter at the last General Election, in 1935, could listen to Attlee, to Sinclair, and to Chamberlain speaking to him and could say "I like" or "I don't like" as the case might be, "the sound of that man." And liking or not liking the sound of a man on the wireless is surely not such a bad way of deciding whether or not to vote for his supporters.

But then people say: "This is all very well. We agree that in a rough and ready sort of way the people of Britain decides once every five years who is going to govern it for the next five, but it does not govern itself at all between those General Elections for during those intervals between Elections it has no means of making its voice heard." This, of course, is not true. In Great Britain there is freedom of public meeting, and there is nothing to stop anyone who has any sort of grievance making a great deal of noise about it—if he is prepared to take the trouble to do a lot of work; and if he is not prepared to take that trouble, either he is not a particularly worth-while person or else in all probability his grievance is not really a very important one.

All this is not a mere matter of theory. It is also a matter of practice. All sorts of agitations are started between General Elections, and quite often result in the Government having to change its policy. To select only one example out of many, because it is not only an important but also a recent example of this process, a Government which had won a General Election with a large majority in November,

1935, was compelled by popular clamour the very next month to change its policy, and one of its most powerful Ministers, the Foreign Secretary, had to resign. This was the result of the notorious Hoare-Laval pact and the ordinary people of this country made it so clear in all sorts of ways that they thought the proposals of that pact (to carve up Abyssinia) wrong, that the Government had to give them up, and, as has been said, Sir Samuel Hoare had to resign.

It should be added that the fact of the ordinary people of this country being so clear in their minds that the Hoare-Laval pact was wrong was the consequence of many years of educational work by the League of Nations Union. One of the most effective ways, therefore, in which the ordinary citizen can make his influence felt between Elections is by joining and working for voluntary societies of that kind.

What democracy in Great Britain seems in practice, therefore, to come to is the right of the British people to choose once every five years which set of men is going to govern it for the next five years, and the right to protest vigorously meanwhile if the Government does something it does not like—to squeal noisily if it finds that the shoe is in fact pinching. Now, these words have been deliberately chosen in order to put the claim that Britain really is a democracy on the lowest possible footing. But even when the claim is put as low as this, it may be asked whether the system which has just been described is such a bad one.

One of the ways of answering this question is to compare this system with those of dictatorial countries. Take the case of Germany. Supposing you are a German and you think that the war is a mistake from the German point of view. What can you do about it? There will be spies all round you; your home may be forcibly entered and searched ("an Englishman's home is his castle"); your letters will be liable to be read by the secret police; and your telephone conversations, if you are rich enough to have a telephone, will be "tapped." You won't, of course, be allowed to write a letter to the papers or to call a meeting and make a speech saying that you think the war is a mistake, and if you do express that opinion even in your own home, perhaps one Gestapo for treason; thereafter you will probably be taken away to a concentration camp and nobody will ever hear anything about you again. Germans, in short, who are opposed to Hitler's Government (and there always have been of the members of your own family will denounce you to the a large number of them who are opposed to it), have no recognised means of making their opposition felt. They can only oppose the Government in underground ways which

will be extremely dangerous to themselves. The great test of whether or not a Government is a democracy is whether or not there is a permitted, recognised, perfectly legal way of opposing the Government of the day; whether, in short, more than one political party is allowed. In Great Britain if the majority of us do not like the Government of the day we can turn it out at the General Election, but if the majority of Germans were to cease to approve of Hitler's Government they could not do anything about it, except resort to violent revolution. It is easy enough to criticise party politics, but looked at in this way is there not a lot to be said for a political system which allows us, absolutely peacefully, to change the Government by changing one party for another?

PART II

I. Introduction

The plan of this pamphlet so far has been, first, very briefly to define the meaning of democracy, and then to consider how far democracy does exist in Great Britain. It has been argued that democracy in the form of representative government does indeed exist in this country and that the most important opportunity which the ordinary Englishman has to express his opinion about politics, i.e., to take his share in the government of the country, is the casting of his vote at a General Election. The plan of the rest of this pamphlet will be to consider in turn the truth or falsehood of various arguments which are brought forward to show how imperfectly democratic is the state of affairs which has just been described. Since General Elections are the most fundamental part of the process of "government by the people" in this country the best plan seems to be to divide the consideration of these critical arguments into two parts—first, the criticisms of what happens during a General Election itself, and second, criticisms of what subsequently happens during the ensuing period of five years until the next General Election.

Three arguments are used to show that a General Election is not really a fair way of discovering the opinions of the people on the political questions of the day, and therefore is not really democratic.

2. Is the Electoral System Mathematically Unfair ?

The first of these arguments, which involves exceptionally complicated questions, which can only be dealt with very briefly here, is that our present electoral system means that the opinions of the people are not accurately represented mathe-

matically by the results of General Elections. In view of the fact that the populations of our constituencies are not equal in size this is undoubtedly true, and it is theoretically possible for a party to gain only a minority of the votes but none the less a majority of the seats. Thus, to take a theoretical example, if you imagine five constituencies each with 10,000 inhabitants and six each with 1,000 inhabitants, and that Party A wins the five larger constituencies with a majority of 7,000 to 3,000 but loses the six smaller constituencies by a similar margin, 300 to 700, you will find, if you work it out, that Party A's total 36,800 votes has only won it 5 seats, while Party B's total of 19,200 votes has gained it 6 seats and so the majority.

Now, the question is what is the remedy for this state of affairs? One remedy advocated is proportional representation, which, briefly, means exchanging our present system of single-member constituencies (with a few double-member constituencies) for multi-member constituencies and dividing the number of seats in Parliament in exact proportion (or as nearly exact proportion as may be possible) to the number of votes cast for each particular party. This system would undoubtedly ensure a very much more accurate representation of public opinion than our present system. What, then, are the objections to it? Two spring at once to mind. First, multi-member constituencies must mean a decrease of personal contact between M.P.s and their constituents; second, proportional representation tends to produce an increase in the number of political parties and hence weak, coalition governments. (This matter is referred to again in the next section.) In any case, could not all the advantages of proportional representation, with none of its disadvantages, be secured by a redistribution of seats so as to make all constituencies more nearly equal? There has been no such redistribution since 1918.

3. Are Party Politics Undemocratic ?

The second of these arguments is a criticism of the party system itself. Why, it is said, should the voter be limited to having to vote for one of three political parties? Very probably he may feel that he does not completely agree with the policies of any of these three parties. Why then should he have to label himself as either Conservative, or Liberal, or Labour? Similarly it is argued that the parliamentary candidate himself cannot genuinely agree with *all* the policies of the party which he is supporting, and that therefore, merely out of party loyalty, he pretends to believe in all sorts of things in which he does not really believe. But, on the other

hand, why should any one voter out of a total of, say, 30,000 in a constituency expect there to be a parliamentary candidate with *all* of whose opinions he is completely in agreement? To get anything done in a democracy you obviously cannot just stand out for your own opinions, you must try and get other people to agree with them, and it is very unlikely that you will be able to get everybody else to agree completely with all your opinions. You must, therefore, be prepared to give up some of your points in return for other people giving up some of theirs. That is, after all, really how political parties come into being, and why we must have them, and why they are not really such bad institutions. If all our 615 M.P.s were Independents, how could the government of the country be carried on? Supposing there were to be a House of Commons composed of 615 Independent M.P.s, surely within a week of its first meeting parties would begin to appear in the form of groups of those Independent M.P.s combining in order to carry through policies on which they were all more or less agreed; in other words, they would very soon cease to be Independents.

The point has been perfectly put by Edmund Burke in his definition of a political party. "Party," he said, "is a body of men united for promoting the national interest on some particular principle in which they are all agreed." If you accept that definition of political parties, what is fundamentally wrong with party politics as a means of carrying on the government of a democratic country? Perhaps it is only because political parties have existed for such a very long time in this country and that we have in consequence forgotten the reasons for which they originally came into existence, and take for granted the value of their existing, that we are apt to criticise the party system rather too freely.

Moreover, the actual experience of the workings of democracy in many countries shows that the more political parties there are—the further, that is to say, that one gets away from party politics—the worse democracy works, and that it works best when, as is usually the case in this country, there are only two big political parties. Where you have a lot of small parties all Governments must be formed by joining several of them together in coalitions, and coalition Governments, as opposed to Governments based on a single party, all of whose members are bound closely together by the beliefs which they hold in common, are normally weak Governments. Weak Governments make people think that they want a strong Government, and they are very likely to jump to the mistaken conclusion that they can only get a strong Government through Fascism.

Then, again, is it not broadly true that although very likely we are not in complete agreement with all the policies of either big political party, we are all of us, almost by nature, either conservative or radical? We are either the sort of people who think that on the whole things are not so bad and there is not any great need to change them, or we are the sort of people who think that things are very bad indeed and that there is a need for very big changes. We may give all sorts of reasons for saying that we are either Conservative or Socialist, but is not the fundamental reason largely a question of temperament? And is it not really quite natural that all over the world people should fall into those two groups, either those who want on the whole to conserve, or only alter very slowly, the existing state of things, or those who want to make big changes in it very rapidly? Seen in this way, party politics is only the expression of a rock-bottom fact of human nature itself.

There is one other reason for being in favour of the party system which ought to be mentioned. It gives scope for the energy of those who are spontaneously deeply interested in political questions. Probably most of us take very little interest in politics most of the time. Unless things go very wrong, or unless something is done which affects us personally in such a way as to make us feel that we have a big grievance, we like to be bothered with politics as little as possible. Incidentally, that is another reason for saying that a system which gives us the power to protest when things go wrong, but to do very little else between Elections, is a good system, because most people do not, in fact, want to do anything about politics between Elections except protest if and when things seem to go wrong. But there is surely always a small minority of people who are naturally deeply interested in politics in the way in which other small minorities of people are naturally deeply interested in music, or painting, or football, or whatever it may be. Now, the party system means that those people who have got this deep interest in politics can play their part in politics all the time. They can join and run the local political organisations and do all the necessary donkey work which they, in fact, enjoy doing.

Here again, surely, it is not a bad system which allows in this way people who are exceptionally enthusiastic and energetic about politics to play a rather more active part in them than people who are on the whole lazy and indifferent about them? How else are the natural political leaders to become the actual political leaders? Probably most of the actual parliamentary candidates themselves are persons of this type, that is to say, natural political leaders, though it

must be admitted that on both the Conservative and on the Labour side it is much easier for a man with a lot of money behind him to be selected as a candidate than a man with little or nothing to contribute to his electoral expenses. It is also true, however, that both parties are very anxious to change this state of affairs, if only on the ground that it very often prevents them obtaining the services of the best possible man.

4. Are the Electoral Scales Weighted ?

So much for criticisms of the party system. The third main argument against the idea of a General Election being a genuine test of "the will of the people" is the argument that, although it is true that we are all on equal terms as voters, because we are all (with only a handful of exceptions) limited to one vote each, the scales are in fact weighted in favour of whichever side has more money to spend, because by spending money (in quite legal ways) you can influence the way in which people vote. You can, for example, hire the biggest halls for the meetings, you can provide more posters, you can use more motor-cars to take voters to the polling booths. And, above all, since under modern conditions newspapers with large circulations require enormous sums of money to run, you can, if you are rich enough to own an important newspaper, make use of that newspaper to influence its readers to think in the same way about politics as you do yourself.

Now, of course, the law does at present set a limit to the amount of money which can be spent in fighting an election, and maybe this part of our law needs to be amended and tightened up. But as to the influence of newspapers on the political opinions of their readers, do we not tend to over-estimate the extent of that influence? After all, there is in most human beings an element of "contra-suggestiveness," that is to say, that when we read a leading article in a newspaper putting certain arguments before us (or when, indeed, reading this pamphlet putting certain arguments before you), we know that the writer is trying to "get at us," there is in consequence a natural tendency to think of the opposite arguments. That is why direct propaganda is never so successful as indirect propaganda. Shaw in his plays, Low in his cartoons, Dickens in his novels, probably influence us more to accept their ideas than someone who is quite plainly setting out to influence us, just because we enjoy those plays, cartoons and novels as good plays, good cartoons and good novels, and in enjoying them in that way unconsciously accept many of the ideas which they put forward.

Is it not the same with newspapers? We are not influenced

so much by the leading articles, which are frankly putting forward a point of view, as by the actual way in which the news itself is presented to us, some news being left out altogether, and other items emphasised, the object in both cases being indirectly to influence our opinions. But even so the extent to which newspapers influence public opinion is at the present time steadily decreasing, for the reason that newspapers are no longer the only instrument for influencing public opinion. Their greatest rival to-day is, of course, broadcasting, and many people have been sufficiently influenced by the possibly colourless but objective B.B.C. news bulletins to become sceptical of the truth of the colourful and biased accounts of the same evidence in the less reliable newspapers.

Apart from that, the general standard of education in schools is slowly—alas, all too slowly—going up, and this, together with the influence of evening classes organised by local authorities and by such bodies as the University Extension Movements, the Workers' Educational Association, and the Association for Education in Citizenship, responsible for the publication of this pamphlet, is resulting in more and more people thinking for themselves and not saying of any given account of some piece of news: "It must be true—I read it in the paper."

In any case, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. It is on the whole true that most newspapers are owned by rich men and that most rich men support the Conservative side in politics. On the other hand, Left-Wing parties and persons do attain political power in democratic countries in spite of the opposition to them of the bulk of the Press. This has been consistently true of Roosevelt in the United States of America. It was also true of the rise to power in France in 1936 of the Front Populaire, and in this country, though the Labour Press is comparatively unimportant, none the less the Labour Party has become the second largest party in the State and we have had two Labour Governments, whilst at the present moment the two largest cities in Great Britain, London and Glasgow, both have Labour majorities on their councils.

So much for the arguments as to General Elections not being genuinely democratic. Next we come to the arguments for supposing that we are not democratically governed in the intervals between Elections.

5. Is the Cabinet a Dictatorship ?

First comes the plea that while it may be true that a majority of the people elect a majority of the House of

Commons, that majority of the House of Commons is in its turn completely subject to the Cabinet of the day, and that the Cabinet is therefore virtually a dictatorship.

Now, it is true that the Cabinet is in a position of very great power as against the House of Commons, and this is so primarily for the reason that in this country the Prime Minister of the day has what is called "the right of dissolution." He can at any time order his motor-car, drive from Downing Street to Buckingham Palace and say to the King (though he may not necessarily use these words): "I advise Your Majesty to dissolve the present House of Commons," and the King, being a constitutional monarch, is bound to accept his Prime Minister's advice. This means that there will be a General Election even before the usual five-year period has come to an end, and a General Election is something which Members of Parliament do not like. They dislike it for two reasons, first, because it involves them in a great deal of trouble and expense, and second, because it is always possible that at the end of the Election they will no longer be Members of Parliament. Members of the majority party, of course, particularly dislike the idea of an Election for fear of its resulting in the loss of their majority.

The Prime Minister, therefore, having this power of dissolution, has the whip-hand over the House of Commons, and he has usually only to crack that whip to bring it, from his point of view, to heel. But, of course, there is nothing to stop the House of Commons defying this threat if it really wants to. Usually it will not want to defy the Prime Minister, because a majority of the Members will be followers of the party of which the Prime Minister is the leader, and therefore on the whole content with his policy. If, however, enough members of his party go over to the Opposition to bring about a loss of his majority and consequently his defeat on some important question in the House of Commons, then the Prime Minister has, as it is said, "lost the confidence of the House of Commons," and must resign. This has actually happened on thirteen occasions since 1835.

Sometimes even the Prime Minister resigns not because he has actually been defeated, but because he has won a vote only by some comparatively small majority and feels that he cannot continue to govern the country with only such a small majority, although he still technically possesses the confidence of the House of Commons and so could go on governing the country if he was absolutely determined to do so. This was the case with Mr. Chamberlain. He was not actually defeated in the House of Commons, but received only such a small majority in the vote after the debate on the conduct

of the Norwegian campaign that he felt he could not go on governing the country on those terms, especially as in time of war it is more than ever necessary that the Prime Minister should possess the full confidence of the House of Commons and of the country as a whole.

That incident showed that the House of Commons can still perfectly well assert its authority against that of the Government of the day, and it is in fact constantly doing this in all sorts of other less spectacular ways. One of the House's most important duties is the function of criticism, which it carries out particularly by means of Questions to Ministers and also by debates of all kinds, and there is no doubt that all Governments continually modify their policies in response to expressions of opinion on the part of some section, possibly even a minority of the House of Commons, even though there may never be a vote at all, still less an actual defeat.

Nevertheless, it is on the whole surely right that the Government should be in a position of great power. No body of 615 persons can themselves actually do the day-to-day work of governing the country. But that work must be done, and democracy must not mean weak government. The British system ensures that normally we have a strong Government. Normally we elect a Government all of whose members belong to the same party and therefore work well together, and with a clear majority in Parliament, and we then give that Government a full five years to carry out the promises which its leaders made to us at the General Election. It is surely only right that we should in this way give the people who govern us full power, and plenty of time, to carry out their promises. In this way they and their ideas are given a fair trial. At the end of their five years, if we think that we have given them plenty of rope and that they have only used it to hang themselves, we can turn them out in favour of the other lot. But the fact that we have strong Governments between Elections only makes—to go back to an earlier point—more important our initial choice of Government at the Election.

6. Are we really Ruled by Civil Servants ?

Now we come to the argument that all this system of Elections and Parliaments and Cabinets is the merest facade, because the country is in fact governed by the permanent officials, i.e., the Civil Servants. We need not spend much time in disposing of this plea. It is true that high-up Civil Servants are important and powerful people, but they act under the orders of their Ministers. If the Minister is so weak or so incompetent that he gives no orders of any signifi-

cance, then the Civil Servants—who have a strong spirit of professional pride—will run the Department as best they can in order that it shall not wholly lose its reputation. In other words, the country comes nearest to being governed by Civil Servants when Ministers are weak or incompetent. But Civil Servants know perfectly well that this is not their real job, it is not one which they like doing, and any Minister who knows his business will see to it that it is he who gives the orders and the Civil Servants who carry them out, and this is the normal state of affairs.

7. Is Hereditary Monarchy a Democratic Institution ?

One very important permanent official, if one chooses so to describe him, is the King. Ministers come and Ministers go, but the King goes on until he dies. Now it is not generally realised that the King carries out not only ceremonial but also political functions, though what precisely those functions are is a somewhat mysterious matter. Bagehot said that the King has three rights:—the right to be consulted, the right to encourage, and the right to warn, and it is perfectly clear that any monarch, if he chooses to exercise those three rights, can, especially as he gains in experience, exercise a considerable influence on the actions of the Government of the day. Whether and how he exercises that influence is always completely unknown unless and until, possibly many years after his death, his letters, his diaries, and so on, are published. It seems questionable whether it is genuinely democratic that a hereditary ruler who has not been elected by the people should be anything more than a figure-head.

8. Is the House of Lords a Democratic Institution ?

Last comes the argument that our Constitution contains another institution which is based on the principle of heredity, and not that of election by the people, and is therefore undemocratic, namely, the House of Lords. Put in this way the charge that the House of Lords is an undemocratic institution must simply be at once admitted.

It is none the less important to be clear as to what exactly the House of Lords is and what its powers are. If you sit in the gallery of the Upper House as a listener to one of its ordinary debates you will probably be struck by two facts—first, the small number of Members present, probably between 20 and 30, and second, the high level of debate. Debates in the House of Lords are indeed often on a much higher level than those in the House of Commons. The reason for both these two facts is the same, namely, that out of a total of

some 750 Peers a small number of real experts will be found on any given subject, and it will be only these experts who will attend the debate and speak, not only with great knowledge of the subject but also "without fear or favour of the crowd." When some merely technical question is under consideration it may be an advantage for legislators to speak without having in any way to consider the wishes or the passions of the electorate. The House of Lords also serves a useful purpose in providing a platform for certain "elder statesmen" (the late Lord Oxford and Asquith, for example), who no longer have the physical energy requisite to the great strain involved in being a Member of the House of Commons, and taking part in the rough and tumble of Elections.

Now, if the House of Lords confined its activities to debates on technical questions in which the speakers were either experts on those particular questions or elder statesmen (or both at once), there would be very little complaint against it. Unfortunately, however, the House of Lords has very great and very important political powers. How great and how important they are we tend to forget, because since 1915 there have been only two Governments which have not been wholly or partly Conservative, and in consequence those powers have not been used since before the first World War. There is, however, no reason to suppose that they would not be used again in the event of either the Labour or the Liberal party (or a combination of the two) obtaining a majority in the House of Commons. The reason for holding this belief is quite simply that there is a permanent and overwhelming Conservative majority in the Upper House, and thus when a Liberal or Labour Government is in power in the House of Commons and some measure involving some issue of high policy (as opposed to some merely technical issue) comes before the Upper House, the normal attendance is multiplied at least ten times by the attendance of the so-called "back-woodsmen." The ensuing debate is marked, to say the least, by rather less than the usual amount of objectivity.

Briefly, the present powers of the House of Lords amount to this. It has no powers whatever so far as any Bill is concerned which is brought up from the House of Commons and certified by its Speaker to be a Money Bill. So far as all other Bills are concerned, the House of Lords still has the power to delay their being passed into law for a maximum period of two years.

These are very important powers for two reasons. In the first place, although the Speaker's impartiality in this matter is beyond all question, there is always some doubt as to whether he will certify any given Bill as a Money Bill. Very

often indeed the Speaker of the time, following the definition of such a Bill laid down in the Parliament Act, has actually not so certified the year's Finance Bill itself. Consider in the second place how important is the power to delay some non-financial measure for a period of two years. Imagine, for example, some Government coming into power and making the key point of its legislative programme, let us say, the nationalisation of the banking system, and let us further assume that the Bill to carry out this policy is not certified by the Speaker as a purely Money Bill, as well it might not be. Let us next suppose that the House of Lords, on the ground that it is opposed to the whole principle of nationalisation, amends the Bill out of all recognition, or simply rejects it outright. What confusion would follow! How could that hypothetical Government continue in those circumstances to govern the country according to the ideas which it thought best and which, on the assumption we are making, had just been approved by a majority of the electorate? There can, in fact, be very little doubt that the existence of the House of Lords in its present form and with its present powers is the most important blemish on the democratic character of our political institutions.*

*It is intended to discuss the question of how the House of Lords could be reformed in a later pamphlet in this series entitled "How Parliament Does Its Work."

9. Does Democracy Only Work when Political Parties Agree on Fundamentals ?

There remain for discussion two extremely important and also extremely controversial points. The first of these is the argument that parliamentary democracy only works when the two political parties, however much they may differ on minor questions, are in agreement on fundamentals; that this was, in fact, the position in Britain in the nineteenth century, which was the hey-day of democracy, but that it has now ceased to be the case in view of the fact that the Conservative and Labour Parties hold diametrically opposed views as to whether private enterprise is the best means of carrying on the economic life of the country. It is said that the owners of private property value their right of ownership so highly that if and when the day comes when the Labour Party makes a decisive attack on those rights, they are sure to use any means, including, if necessary, actual violence, to resist that attack, even if the policy which it embodies has the support of the majority of the electorate.

It is indeed perfectly clear that if such a conflict were to occur democracy would break down. The whole theory

under consideration is, however, one which calls for certain comments. First, it is all very well now to say in retrospect that throughout the nineteenth century first the Whig and Tory, and then their successors, the Conservative and Liberal parties, were in agreement on fundamentals. All the evidence goes to show that they did not in the least think that they were at the time. The issues which divided political parties in those days, for example, Parliamentary Reform, Free Trade versus Protection, Irish Home Rule, seemed every whit as difficult to solve without endangering the whole fabric of democracy as does to us to-day the issue of private property, and surely the fact of people feeling at any given moment that they are hopelessly divided is what is, in fact, likely to cause violence between them, and the fact that a hundred years later a historian is able to point out that they were not hopelessly divided does not necessarily give us a complete explanation of why in fact the division, which was undoubtedly felt to be most serious at the time, did not in practice result in violence. The lessons of history on the whole are against the theory which has just been described, for they tell us that all sorts of problems which at the time seemed extremely difficult to solve peacefully were in fact so solved. This is an encouraging precedent for those who to-day believe that democracy can solve peacefully even such a difficult problem as the place of private enterprise in economic life.

The second comment arises out of the first, for it is also a point of history. The question is, when it is said that a decisive attack on the rights of private property will meet with anti-democratic resistance, what is meant by "decisive"? Is not the first assault on the citadel more likely to be resisted than the last, when all the outer walls have either crumbled or have been already successfully conquered? The experience of history seems to give an affirmative answer to this question, for however much we may argue that the Conservative and Labour parties to-day are more divided on fundamental principles than were the Conservative and Liberal parties before the first World War, the historical fact is that the amount of real passion and bitterness, overlapping even from the political into the personal sphere, was far greater then than it is now. And what is the explanation of this? Is it not the fact that propertied people in this country saw in Lloyd George's famous "People's Budget" the first deliberate attempt to use taxation, not merely as a means of paying for the necessary expenses of the Government, but as a positive means of redistributing wealth, and therefore fought these proposals tooth and nail, precisely because they em-

bodied the *first* attempt to use taxation in this way? The idea of taxation of this kind is one which subsequently we have all got so used to that, even before there was any question of footing the bill for the war, increases in income tax and surtax provoked very little opposition. If the whole of industry is eventually to be socialised may not the process of socialisation follow this same pattern? First one industry and then another will be nationalised until finally, when there comes the turn of the last industry remaining in private hands, even the opponents of nationalisation will have become so accustomed to it that there will seem no particular point in resisting one final application of the principle involved, and Socialism will become an established fact almost without anyone appreciating the significance of what has occurred.

This is a view which is supported not only by our own history but also by that of the United States. President Roosevelt's domestic policies have been passionately opposed by a powerful minority of American citizens for the reason that with his New Deal he has been making the *first* attack on what in America is called "rugged individualism." Those who later pursue the same policy even further are likely to encounter less opposition.

It may be noted also that the theory which is being described assumes a unity on the part of owners of property which does not in fact exist. Owners of property are of very many different kinds, some owning large amounts and others small, and they do not easily co-operate. If a proposal is made, for example, to nationalise the coal-mining industry, is it human nature that the cotton owners will rush to support the coal owners? Moreover, a Socialist Minister who is nationalising some industries with fair compensation may, by raising the general level of prosperity, be ensuring substantial profits for others.

In the third place, it may be doubted whether the issue between Capitalism and Socialism is quite so clear-cut as the theory under discussion supposes. Mr. Morrison, when he was Minister for Transport in the second Labour Government, replaced the London General Omnibus Company, the Metropolitan Railway and the various Tube railway companies, with which we were all so familiar, by the London Passenger Transport Board. It is a question of opinion whether that was Socialism or not, but be it noted that the Bill which Mr. Morrison originally introduced and carried through the House of Commons was eventually passed, with only a few changes, by a new House of Commons with a Conservative majority.

This is an illustration of two tendencies which undoubtedly recur in our political history. First, English political parties do not on the whole attempt to unscramble eggs. Disraeli in 1846 broke up the Conservative party in order to try and prevent the repeal of the Corn Laws, but when he became Prime Minister in 1874, with an absolute majority, he did not attempt to reintroduce them. Second, English political parties have a habit of learning from their opponents and carrying into law measures which are contrary to their own principles, because they seem to them "practical." It is part of our national character not to be unduly concerned with principles. Thus we should remember that four of the greatest reforms of the nineteenth century, Catholic Emancipation in 1829, the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, the Second Reform Act in 1867, the Trade Union legislation of 1875, were enacted by *Conservative* Governments, and similarly in more recent days the Conservative party has enacted a number of measures, for example, the setting up of the Central Electricity Board, which would ordinarily be described as Socialist.

To go back to the example of the London Passenger Transport Board, supposing we were to wake up to-morrow and find that every important industry in the country had been treated in the same way as London transport, that the shareholders had been bought out and given stock bearing fixed rates of interest, that existing managers of the type of Lord Ashfield had been retained under the new organisation on an exclusively salaried basis, that unification had been achieved and that ultimate control had been vested in boards appointed by non-political persons of high standing, should we then say that the country had gone Socialist overnight or not? Or should we say that a new system had been introduced, falling half-way between Socialism and Capitalism? Such a system may well be that which will eventually prevail, and if so, one may well ask what justification there is for this view of an irreconcilable division between the Conservative and Socialist parties. In any case, faced as we all are by the Nazi menace, the question of whether we are to have Socialism or Capitalism seems of singularly little importance in comparison with the question of whether the individual is to exist for the State, or the State for the individual. The war has also been responsible for substantial changes in the organisation of industry effected broadly by agreement between the State, employers and Trade Unions, and these changes may be carried over into our post-war arrangements in such a way as to "kill" the old issue of Capitalism versus Socialism.

But perhaps these are optimistic views. Perhaps a very real division will continue and the day will come when

property owners feel that their deepest beliefs and interests are decisively threatened. They may, in those circumstances, feel a temptation to use any weapon to hand, however undemocratic, to resist the will of the majority. But does it follow that they will in fact yield to this temptation? The last battle to be fought on English soil occurred at Sedgemoor in 1685. Does such a long-established tradition of settling our differences without violence count for nothing in men's minds, and may they not consciously decide that no political or economic question is half so important as the necessity for preserving the democratic method of settling those questions?

10. Is Our Democracy Incomplete ?

Last of all comes the assertion that our democracy is incomplete because it is a political democracy and not an economic one. Presumably what is meant by this assertion is that though through our votes and through our representatives in Parliament we control the political affairs of this country, we do not control its economic affairs, because in them private enterprise reigns supreme. Private enterprise, of course, in point of fact has been subject to increasing control by the State whatever political party has been in power since the middle of the last century. But broadly the picture of Britain as a political but not an economic democracy is no doubt correct.

But what moral are we to draw from this assertion? Surely that we should use the political democracy which we already have in order to increase our control over the economic life of the country. It has been argued that there is no reason to suppose that in this country a political party whose programme was the extension of democracy into the economic sphere could not obtain a majority at the polls and thereafter carry its programme into effect in the ordinary peaceful parliamentary way. If, therefore, you believe that the present system is a half-way house and that our existing political arrangements require to be completed by corresponding economic ones, and that this object can be achieved by democratic means, then your duty is clear—your duty is as early as possible to set about persuading the majority of your fellow-citizens to share your point of view. Since a very large number of them already share it, that task is not so difficult as it may at first sound. If, on the other hand, you are opposed to the policy of economic democracy, then again your duty is clear and a similar one, namely, to persuade the majority of your fellow-citizens to continue to vote in favour of the retention broadly of the present system. But if, finally,

you are in favour of the end of economic as well as political democracy, but are convinced that that end cannot be attained by the means of political democracy already to hand, that—to revert to earlier arguments—the scales are hopelessly weighted by and in favour of wealth, that it is therefore almost impossible for a party primarily concerned with the interests of the poor to win a General Election, and that even if it did its legislation would be sabotaged by Civil Servants and by “Big Business,” then it may be suggested that your duty is to prepare for a desirable revolution in the most practicable manner possible by buying a revolver at the earliest possible moment and practising in your back yard. But when this view is in this way carried to its logical conclusion, surely its absurdity, and the over-riding importance of retaining at all costs the democratic method of settling our political differences, become all the more apparent.

SOME SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

(The figures refer to the relevant sections of the pamphlet.)

PART I

1. What do you think is the meaning of democracy?
What are the arguments against democracy?
2. Does democracy work in different ways in small and in large societies?
How can the democratic spirit of small voluntary societies be carried into big political communities?
3. Could modern States be governed by direct democracy?
Should representation be on an occupational rather than on a territorial basis?
5. Is the achievement of universal suffrage the equivalent of the achievement of political democracy?
Have the results of universal suffrage in Britain been disappointing?
6. Should we have General Elections in war-time?
Which do we vote for at General Elections, men or measures? Which ought we to vote for?
How much political knowledge ought the ordinary voter to have? How can it be made easier for him to gain political knowledge?
Is there in Britain freedom of the Press and personal freedom in general?
How can the ordinary voter make his influence felt politically between Elections?
What are the advantages and disadvantages of our system of government in comparison with dictatorial systems?

PART II

2. What are the arguments for and against proportional representation, other than those mentioned?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of party politics?
What war-time substitute for party politics can we find as a means of stimulating interest in political questions?
4. How difficult is it for a poor party to win an Election against a rich party?
How great is the political influence of the Press?
5. Which should be the master and which the servant, the Cabinet or the House of Commons?
In what ways does the House of Commons make its influence felt over the Government of the day?
6. What are the arguments for and against government by bureaucracy?

7. Is a Republic a more democratic form of government than a Monarchy?
8. What is the case for and against the House of Lords?
What are its powers?
Are two Houses a necessity for democracy?
Do you think the House of Lords should be reformed, and if so, how?
9. Has democracy only worked in our history because both parties have been in agreement on fundamentals?
Is it now bound to break down because one party supports Capitalism and the other Socialism?
10. What is meant by "economic democracy"?
Is Britain a democracy, and if not, what is needed to make it one?

Short List of Books for Further Reading

- R. Bassett—Essentials of Parliamentary Democracy.
- C. Delisle Burns—Democracy (Home University Library).
- A. V. Dicey—Law and Opinion in the Nineteenth Century.
- H. J. Laski—Communism (Home University Library).
- H. J. Laski—Democracy in Crisis.
- A. D. Lindsay—The Essentials of Democracy.
- F. L. Lucas—Delights of Dictatorship.
- Herbert Morrison—Socialisation and Transport.
- A. L. Rowse—The Question of the House of Lords.
- R. H. Tawney—Equality.
- R. H. Tawney—Why Britain Fights (Macmillan war pamphlet, 3d.).

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1. How to Lead Discussion Groups
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